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ABSTRACT

To determine whether imaginative literature should be used in freshman composition courses, teachers must first determine what the purpose of a first-year writing course is. Historically, reading and writing about literature entered the curriculum when faculty became concerned with establishing English departments. Prior to this, instruction in composition equipped students to be successful in the academy and in public life by engaging political questions and moral issues. Today, as the only remaining required course at most colleges, freshmen composition should offer guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. Such courses have as their subject matter the processes whereby writers and readers enter the conversation of the academy and contribute to the making of knowledge. In addition, there are five reasons why using literature in freshmen English is inappropriate: (1) literature-based courses focus on consuming texts, not producing them; (2) the curriculum already has humanistic content; (3) studying literature does not teach style; (4) students do not need to study literature to apply the new insights of critical theorists; and (5) teaching literature does not enrich the training programs of graduate students. There is, in fact, a certain schizophrenia in the profession currently about what writing courses should be. Writing instructors must become comfortable with constructing student-centered classrooms in which students are encouraged to join the conversations that a good education enables. (HB)

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The Case Against Using Literature in Freshman Composition

CCCC Meeting, Cincinnati, March 1992

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The Case Against Using Literature in Freshman Composition

Recent discussions at professional meetings and in the pages of our journals have raised persistent questions about the role of literature in a first-year writing course. Some teachers regret that freshman English has become such an unholy "service course," stripped of the imaginative literature we love to teach. They argue that poetry, fiction, and drama offer essential training in the processes of reading; although literature may have been taught poorly in the past, we should now reassert its importance in the writing course and adopt new methods for teaching literature that result from recent developments in critical theory. Other teachers find these arguments naively arrogant. When freshmen read and write about imaginative literature alone, they remain poorly prepared for the writing required of them in courses outside the English department. Instead of disparaging "the stuff" written in other disciplines, we ought instead to appreciate the varieties and excellences of academic discourse. Such an appreciation would discourage us from drawing false dichotomies between "them" and "us," between academic and personal writing, or between writing inside and outside the academy.

Although imaginative literature disappeared from many first-semester composition classes years ago, it still survives in curricula that require a course in writing about literature, a course that some would argue belongs not to the writing program but rather to the literature program. What seems to be happening

is that writing about literature courses, wherever they may appear in the curriculum, are being contested in ways that have not been apparent before now. It is as if we have already played out our enthusiasm for writing as process and rejected the opportunity to learn more about discourse communities outside the humanities, work essential to teaching cross-curricular writing courses well. As we look about us, waiting for the paradigm to shift, we rediscover literature, which represents for some a welcome resurgence of interest in reading-as-process and, for others, an antidote to writing courses that lack "content."

What disturbs me about these discussions is that we have failed to ask a prior question. We cannot usefully discuss the role of imaginative literature (however defined) in freshman English without first asking what the purpose of a first-year writing course is. The debate centers on more important questions than whether or not to include a poem, play, or novel in a freshman composition syllabus. What is at issue are the goals of a first-year writing course, the training we give the teachers of that course, and the values people ascribe to the course in the college curriculum.

Historically, reading and writing about literature entered the curriculum when faculty became concerned with establishing English departments. At the University of North Carolina, this happened after the Civil War, when various tracks or colleges were set up within the curriculum. A course in English literature was in place by 1869, but it was available only to seniors. Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors studied rhetoric,

grammar, and elocution, pretty much as they had done since the late eighteenth century.

Prior to the Civil War, instruction in composition and rhetoric equipped students to be successful in the academy and in public life. Students came to college to prepare for the ministry, the law and politics, and teaching. The student essays surviving from this period are not based on literature but rather carry such titles as "The Rise and Destiny of the Union," "The Influence of Physical Circumstances on the Formation of Character," and "Religious Tests of Office [Are] Unjust and Impolitic in a Republic." Professor William Mercer Green's grade book for Fall 1848 sets as topics for the sophomore composition class "He that ruleth in spirit s better than he that taketh a city," and "What course of instr tion is best adapted to fit one for the greatest usefulness?"

These political questions and moral issues were not only the subjects of classroom instruction; they also provided the focus for the readings, compositions, and debates held every Friday and Saturday in meetings of UNC's two debating societies, powerful extracurricular organizations to which almost every student belonged. They were academic fraternities that encouraged groupwork, collaborative learning, and peer evaluation. Their combined libraries were three times larger than the collection of books available to the faculty. The debating societies represented a second curriculum, which sometimes had greater force than the one set by the faculty and enabled students to practice the speaking and writing necessary to becoming

successful, influential men. Then as now, students respected the role of college in preparing people for "the greatest usefulness."

Today, we need to ask again what the purpose of the first-year writing course is. Most of us would agree that it is not a remedy for poor training in high school. To see freshman composition as remedial is to undervalue its importance as the only required course remaining in most college curricula. Freshman English does what no high school writing course can do: provide opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes of college writing. Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement.

By defining the course in this way, I am excluding courses preoccupied with grammar, or the essay, or great ideas. As we have known for decades, focusing on grammar instruction reduces the amount of writing practice students are likely to get. Focusing exclusively on the essay--including the critical essay on a work of literature--amounts to collapsing the discourses of the academy into one genre, limiting students' ability to practice other forms, experience other perspectives, negotiate the expectations of other readers. Focusing the course on great ideas also limits students' attention to writing, primarily because "ideas" courses devote too much time to lecture and discussion and too little time to planning, drafting, and

revising. For this reason, I am also unhappy with writing across the curriculum courses that substitute "global warming" or contemporary social issues for the great ideas listed in the thematic tables of contents of more traditional essay readers. The emphasis is still on the essay; the pedagogy, in practice, still involves too much teacher talk and too little writing.

Second-generation writing across the curriculum courses come closer to the ideal I am describing. A freshman writing course linked to a freshman history course, for example, gives students practice reading and writing history. So does a first-year writing course that asks students to read and write a variety of texts found in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Such courses can and should have an immediate connection to the assignments students confront in college. They are not mere skills courses, or training for the professions students may enter five years later; they raise questions of audience, purpose, and form that rhetorical training has always prepared students to address.

Such courses have as their subject matter the processes whereby writers and readers enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge. Writing courses must have verbs, not nouns, at the center: planning, drafting, revising, using data, evaluating sources, reading critically, interpreting evidence, solving problems in writing, understanding and applying the rhetorical and formal conventions of texts, becoming good collaborators. Such courses demand a persistent, rigorous agenda of reading and writing in the

disciplines, and they are difficult to teach. They look and sound more like writing workshops than literature courses, students always at work on some writing project, the teacher serving as an experienced writer, not a lecturer, guiding students in those uses of language that enable them to become historians, biologists, and mathematicians. To be this kind of teacher requires knowing how writers interpret and create texts in many disciplines.

The sort of writing course I have described neither requires nor finds particularly relevant a significant role for literature. That said, I would offer five additional reasons why using literature in freshman English is inappropriate.

First, literature-based courses, even most essay-based courses, focus on consuming texts, not producing them. A decade of observing such classes persuades me that the teacher talks about 75 to 80 percent of the time; students do very little writing; and the writing that they do has little relation to the intellectual demands of assignments in a political science or chemistry class. A 1989-90 survey of upper-division literature courses reveals that "almost all respondents devote some time to [lectures and discussions], while relatively few devote time to [small-group activities and writing]. Further, even respondents using small-group activities and writing exercises generally devote only a small percentage of class time to them" [Bettina J. Huber, "Today's Literature Classroom: Findings from the MLA's 1990 Survey of Upper-Division Courses," ADE Bulletin 101 (Spring 1992): 50]. Because literature courses reflect goals, formats,

and pedagogical approaches different from those of writing courses, many composition teachers decline to emulate their literature colleagues.

But why not teach just one novel or poem, something that will restore the humanistic content to the curriculum? Because the curriculum already has humanistic content. Most college students must take humanities, arts, and literature courses, so literature does not need to be transported into a writing course for the sake of "humanism." Most literature courses are not humanistic. They present the teacher's or the critic's truths about the poetry, fiction, and drama being studied. They rarely connect literature with life. In the event students get to write a paper or two, they must assume the disembodied voice of some academic journal as they analyze the ingrown toenail motif in Beowulf. Such assignments silence students' voices in the conversation literature is intended to promote. In other words, literature teaching offers the writing teacher no model worth emulating.

But suppose specific literary works matter less than the habits of mind students might develop by studying them. Doesn't studying literature help teach style? I don't think so. Examining literary language has limited usefulness in a writing course because our students do not write literature; they write about it or respond to it. If they aren't writing poems, or short stories, or even dialogues, why do we look to literary language as a stylistic model? I'll tell you why: because when teachers ask students to write about literature, style becomes

the content of these critical essays. Style and theme--the ingrown toenail motif--are invariably the subject matters students write about. Such courses define literary style as the subject of analysis, not the range of linguistic options for treating any subject. A better way to teach style is by asking students to examine the texts they encounter in the academy, texts that define a much larger repertoire of rhetorical options than literary language customarily allows. Simply recognizing these conventions is not enough; students must also make them work in their own writing, by creating texts like those they read, by talking back to the models.

Some people believe that recent work in critical theory offers new reasons to teach literature in freshman English classes. Presumably we now have a better understanding of how readers engage texts, how those texts are socially constructed, and how the processes of reading and writing create bridges between the individual and the larger linguistic community. Although critical theory may offer new ways of interpreting texts, we do not have to study literature to apply these new insights. A theory of reading or of texts that depends on literature, that moves aside the texts our students read and write, is no help to a writing teacher. Reader-response criticism, social constructionism, and feminist approaches can inform the teaching of writing, not because they need literature to make the point, but because they also apply to non-literary texts. Critical theory has value only insofar as it gives our students a more self-conscious awareness of their behavior as

readers, engaged in significant acts of language in every class they take, not just in a literature class.

Interpreting texts also represents only one way of knowing, a process of knowledge-making peculiar to the humanities. Other disciplines value different methods of making meaning: closely observing natural phenomena, refusing to generalize beyond the data, removing the personal element for the sake of neutrality. Although literary critics value the personal interpretations readers construct from texts, social scientists value the ability to replicate interpretations of data, and most scientists would define "data" in such a way as to exclude texts altogether. Each discipline advances its own understanding of what claims are worth asserting, what constitutes evidence, what sorts of proof may be offered, what aims and audiences are legitimate to address, what genres are appropriate. It is simply not the case that interpreting texts will help students gain confidence in interpreting the results of a chemistry experiment, a field experience in a psychology class, or a sculpture. These contexts all assume different kinds of interpretation.

The final argument for teaching literature in freshman English is perhaps the most insidious: it would enrich our training programs for graduate students. They could learn to teach literature as well as writing, becoming the confident, professional pedagogues we hope to send into the job market, happier until then if we let them teach a poem or a novel once in a while. Happier maybe, but not better teachers. The truth is that few faculty members in an English department really care

about teacher training. They care about keeping graduate students employed; they want other departments to know that freshmen are learning something; but they do not teach freshman English often enough to know what is going on in that part of the curriculum or what kinds of training writing teachers would find most valuable. Although literature teachers need training too, asking colleagues who rarely examine what they do in a literature class is not the best place to start. Departments can easily erode a good program for training writing teachers by sliding in a few workshops on teaching literature. A few workshops, however, will not do the job; a course, a practicum, or a substantial mentoring program promises better training. Writing teachers have over a decade of experience developing support systems for inexperienced teachers, but we may need to fight hard to assert their importance and unique goals. Those programs also need revising from time to time so that teachers can learn more about workshop teaching, for example, or the uses of writing outside English departments, or methods of peer, holistic, and portfolio evaluation.

As I have suggested, we cannot discuss the role of literature in the first-year writing course without first defining the purpose of the course. Since we are unlikely to reach consensus on either topic, the issues I have raised may at least offer a way of sorting out the claims and warrants as the discussion continues. Beyond that, we may want to wonder why the discussion is taking place. What does it mean that this topic merits point/counter-point debate in the pages of College

English? In a CCCC crosscurrent session attended by at least 200 people in a Cincinnati hotel? In faculty lounges and committee meetings, where colleagues engage in animated arguments about whether or not to use literature in a first-year writing course?

I am not the first to notice the schizophrenia in our professional discussions about what writing courses should be and how to teach them well. Our journals perpetuate what seems to me an absolutely artificial distinction between personal writing and academic discourse. Many of our newly minted Ph.D.s in composition, taking their cue from Ph.D.s of twenty years ago, refuse to muck around in freshman English once they take tenure-track jobs, opting instead to teach specialized upper-division writing and rhetorical theory courses. The glitz and prestige and extraordinarily high salaries granted to critical theorists in our departments tempt us unwisely to pursue respectability by association.

We have a lot of work to do. In my lifetime, we have always asked too much of the latest development in the field--freewriting, sentence-combining, and now, critical theory. Most writing courses in this country are taught by people who do not read College English, who still adopt essay anthologies for modes courses, who still teach THE research paper instead of research, who succumb to curricula driven by testing programs, and who bleed profusely on students' papers in the mistaken belief that they are upholding standards.

Just now we simply do not have a unified theory to guide our work. In such times of disjunction and divergent views, it is

tempting to cling to what makes us comfortable--literature. We like literature, we know what to say about it, and we have a lot to say. But that is the problem, not the solution: we are saying too much; our students are writing too little. If we will take the time to appreciate the writing that shapes other disciplines, we can become comfortable with, even confident about, constructing student-centered classrooms, where the acts of language we are most concerned about are those of first-year students eager to participate successfully in the rigorous work college demands of them. We need to join our students in exploring these sites of composing found in the academy. Instead of asking our students to write <u>about</u> what it means to be educated, let us assist them to join the conversations an education enables.